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Carol X Weakley 08/21/2006 04:42:58 PM From DB/Inbox: Carol X Weakley

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UNCLAS TEL AVIV 03272

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INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 003272

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SUBJECT: ISRAEL: POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS IN POST-CEASEFIRE POLLS

SUMMARY

¶1. Precisely 48 hours after implementation of the Lebanon ceasefire prime-time Israel Radio was offering a hotline to traumatized victims of the month-long Hizballah bombardment of northern Israel, but poll results from the center of the country, show that those outside the bombardment zone are also stressed, and are ready to take out their anger on Israel's political leaders, rather than its military leaders. According to these polls, the public perception of the political leadership's failed performance will translate into a shift to the right in the next elections, primarily, but not exclusively, at the expense of Kadima's coalition partner, the Labor party. Pending those elections, whether early or on schedule in 2010, the current polls suggest individual politicians may pay a personal price. END SUMMARY.

MARKED FOR FAILURE?

¶2. Earlier this year, Israeli PM Ehud Olmert surprised the pundits by handing the defense portfolio to his principal coalition partner and Labor Party chief, Amir Peretz. Political observers broadly concluded that the Israeli prime minister was motivated by a desire to neutralize Peretz on economic and domestic policy -- areas in which he is a known militant of some expertise. The general perception was that the new DefMin's greatest test would come over the issue of Olmert's promised "realignment" within the West Bank. The working assumption was that whether he succeeded or failed, Peretz would be kept busy, and that major policy decisions concerning defense would be left to Olmert and his close advisors. No experts were heard theorizing that in the event of a military fiasco or even a minor setback, Peretz would usefully -- from Olmert's perspective -- take the fall. But the first post-ceasefire polls suggest just that.

LET THE IDF DO THE JOB

13. When Yediot's post-ceasefire Dachaf poll asked an unspecified number of adult Jewish Israelis how they rated Peretz's performance throughout the fighting, only 36 percent said it had been good, as compared with 63 percent who said it had not been good. Yediot's poll yielded less dramatic but nonetheless unflattering results for PM Olmert's, with a majority 51 percent of those polled labeling his performance "not good," as compared with 47 percent, who rated it "good".

14. Ma'ariv's Teleseker poll was more informative on both counts, showing a curve in Peretz's public fortunes with an initial 28 percent of those polled prior to the hostilities expressing satisfaction with his performance as DefMin, rising to 61 percent at the end of the first week of the Israel-Hizballah conflict, and slamming back to 28 percent the day after the ceasefire. The same poll showed different figures but a similar curve for PM Olmert -- whose public standing stood at only 43 percent approval among those polled prior to the hostilities, rising to 78 percent at the close of the first week of the conflict, and falling back below its starting point to 40 percent the day after the ceasefire.

15. Both the Ma'ariv and Yediot polls suggest that A) public ratings of both PM Olmert and DefMin Peretz were uniformly low prior to the crisis in Lebanon, and B) the perceived progress of hostilities had considerable impact on the evolution of public attitudes. While there were few successes at any time during the conflict to justify the polled surge of public support after the first week of hostilities, it now appears that both ministers were temporary beneficiaries of a degree of "credit" extended by the Israeli public to facilitate completion of what it saw as the task of the military. It was this "credit" that was decimated by the political leadership's acceptance of the ceasefire under terms that the public sees as failing to have achieved most, perhaps any, of Israel's originally stated objectives.

WHEN THE MUSIC STOPPED

16. Both polls found similar results on the issue of the ceasefire. Yediot asked whether Israel should have agreed to it without the return of the kidnapped IDF soldiers, and an overwhelming 70 percent of those polled responded in the negative, with only 27 percent dissenting from this view. When Ma'ariv asked the same question -- while eliminating any mention of the kidnapped soldiers -- the response was less dramatic but still decisive: 53 percent said Israel should have continued to fight, while 42 percent favored agreement. Asked to evaluate the outcome of the fighting, those polled by Yediot and Ma'ariv produced a consensus that there were no clear victors. Of those polled, 36 percent told Yediot that neither side won, while 30 percent gave victory to Israel and a matching 30 percent said Hizballah. Ma'ariv found 18 percent of those polled giving the edge to Israel, while 15 percent saw Hizballah in the lead -- all of which was mitigated by the overwhelming 66 percent that offered the conclusion that nobody won.

SOMEONE MUST PAY

17. Amid much talk -- so far indecisive in its conclusions as to the need and usefulness of a commission of inquiry into the conduct of the hostilities and their outcome -- the focus is sharpening in regard to individual members of the political and military leaderships. Ma'ariv's poll questions stopped short of the issue of resignations, but asked who is responsible for the perceived failures in the conduct of the fighting. Of those polled, 49 percent responded by naming PM Olmert. DefMin Peretz was held responsible by 41 percent of those polled, as compared with the IDF Chief of Staff, LTG Halutz -- named by 40 percent. This could change, however, in light of subsequent revelations that LTG Halutz sold his investment portfolio three hours after the kidnapping of the IDF soldiers and simultaneously with the initial incursion of the IDF into Lebanese territory. Yediot tackled the resignation

issue only to find greater public leniency toward PM Olmert -- whom only 41 percent thought should resign. The IDF Chief of Staff was marginally more vulnerable with 42 percent demanding his resignation. Way ahead of them, DefMin Peretz was clearly identified as expendable by a majority of 57 percent who thought he should forfeit his ministerial office.

TOO EARLY FOR EARLY ELECTIONS

¶8. Could a commission of inquiry avert early elections? Many, not least in PM Olmert's Kadima party, may devoutly wish this to be so. According to both Ma'ariv and Yediot's pollsters, a majority of the public -- 67 percent and 69 percent respectively -- are in favor of the appointment of a commission of inquiry. Only the government is empowered to appoint a commission of inquiry -- in this case of itself -- and a commission's work would be of long duration and therefore liable to be overtaken by events -- so establishing such a commission is not likely to satisfy a public anxious to know why its sons had to fight and die to reach an outcome that most voters say achieved little or nothing for Israel. That leaves the prospect of elections, which polling indicates would take the country to the political right, primarily at the expense of Kadima's major coalition partner, the Labor Party of Amir Peretz.

¶9. Ma'ariv's poll question on how its respondents would vote in a new election found with surprising results: Kadima maintains its 29 seats in the legislature, Labor drops to 15 from its present 19, and Likud picks up seats from Labor, from Shas (which goes down to 10 from 12) and from the Pensioners (who forfeit two of their seven seats). Likud's hypothetical 20 seats may not spell an outright leadership challenge but are just sufficient, according to Ma'ariv's results, for the formation of a slim majority coalition by current opposition parties and with the participation of Shas. While this scenario may be premature, it is sufficiently realistic to give new impetus to the efforts of Likud and its leader, Binyamin Netanyahu, who this week replaced Amir Peretz in the public perception as PM Ehud Olmert's major political rival.

¶10. At the same time, in addition to the Halutz classic act of bad judgment, there are mini-storms brewing over Olmert and his wife's financial transactions in buying a luxury apartment, sexual assault accusations against President Katzav and Justice Minister Ramon, and a job-appointment scandal involving Kadima MK Tzachi Hanegbi. Where these individually or collectively will impact the stability of the current government remains to be seen.

#Cretz